African-American English

African-American English (**AAE**), also known as **Black English** in American linguistics, is the set of English sociolects primarily spoken by most black people in the United States and many in Canada;[1] most commonly, it refers to a dialect continuum ranging from African-American Vernacular English to a more standard English.[2] Like other widely spoken languages, African-American English shows variation such as in vernacular versus standard forms, stylistic variation, rural versus urban characteristics, variation based on geography (that is, features specific to singular cities or regions only), and other types of variation (including age-graded variation). There has been a significant body of African-American literature and oral tradition for centuries.

African-American English began as early as the seventeenth century, when the Atlantic slave trade brought African slaves into British-colonial North America in an area that became the Southern United States in the late eighteenth century.[3] During the development of plantation culture in this region, nonstandard dialects of English were widely spoken by British settlers,[4] as well as likely some creolized varieties, probably resulting in both first- and second-language English varieties developed by African Americans.[3] The nineteenth century's evolving cotton-plantation industry, and eventually the twentieth century's Great Migration, certainly contributed greatly to the spread of the first of these varieties as stable dialects of English among African Americans. The most widespread modern dialect is known as African-American Vernacular English.[1]

African-American English	
Black English	
Region	United States
Ethnicity	African Americans
Language family	Indo-European ▪ Germanic ▪ West Germanic ▪ Ingvaeonic ▪ Anglo–Frisian ▪ English ▪ American English ▪ **African-American English**
Writing system	Latin (English alphabet) American Braille
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	–
Glottolog	*None*

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African-American Vernacular English

African-American Vernacular (AAVE) is the native variety of the vast majority of working- and middle-class African Americans, particularly in urban areas,[1] with its own unique accent, grammar, and vocabulary features. Typical features of the grammar include a "zero" copula (e.g., *she my sister* instead of *she's my sister*),[5] omission of the genitive clitic (e.g., *my momma friend* instead of *my mom's friend*),[6] and complexity of verb aspects and tenses beyond that of other English dialects (e.g., constructions like *I'm a-run*, *I be running*, *I been runnin*, *I done ran*).[7] Common features of the phonology include non-rhoticity (dropping the *r* sound at the end of syllables),[6] the metathetic use of *aks* instead of *ask*,[8] simplification of diphthongs (e.g., *eye* typically sounds like *ah*),[9] a raising chain shift of the front vowels,[10] and a wider range of intonation or "melody" patterns than most General American accents.[11] AAVE is used by middle-class African Americans in casual, intimate, and informal settings as one end of a sociocultural language continuum,[12] and AAVE shows some slight variations by region or city.[13]

African-American Standard English

African-American Standard English is the prestigious end of the middle-class African-American language continuum, used for more formal, careful, or public settings than AAVE. This variety exhibits standard English vocabulary and grammar but often retains certain elements of the unique AAVE accent,[14][15] with intonational or rhythmic features maintained more than phonological ones.[16] Most middle-class African Americans are typically bi-dialectal between this standard variety and AAVE, learning the former variety through schooling, so that adults will frequently even codeswitch between the two varieties within a single conversation. Of the phonological features maintained in this standard dialect, they tend to be less marked.[16] For instance, one such characteristic is the omission of the final consonant in word-final consonant clusters,[17] so words such as *past* or *hand* may lose their final consonant sound.[18]

African-American Appalachian English

Black Appalachian Americans have been reported as increasingly adopting Appalachian/Southern dialect commonly associated with white Appalachians. These similarities include an accent that is rhotic, the categorical use of the grammatical construction "he works" or "she goes" (rather than the AAVE "he work" and "she go"), and Appalachian vocabulary (such as *airish* for "windy"). However, even African-American English in Appalachia is diverse, with African-American women linguistically divided along sociocultural lines.[19]

African-American Outer Banks English

African-American English in the North Carolina Outer Banks is rapidly accommodating to urban AAVE through the recent generations, despite having aligned with local Outer Banks English for centuries.[20]

African Nova Scotian English

African Nova Scotian English is spoken by descendants of Black Nova Scotians, black immigrants from the United States who live in Nova Scotia, Canada. Though most African American freedom seekers in Canada ended up in Ontario through the Underground Railroad, only the dialect of African Nova Scotians retains the influence of West African pidgin.[21] In the 19th century, African Nova Scotian English would have been indistinguishable from English spoken in Jamaica or Suriname.[22] However, it has been increasingly de-creolized since this time, due to interaction and influence from the white Nova Scotian population, who mostly hail from the British Isles. Desegregation of the province's school boards in 1964 further accelerated the process of de-creolization. The language is a relative of the African-American Vernacular English, with significant variations unique to the group's history in the area.[23][24] There are noted differences in the dialects of those from Guysborough County (Black Loyalists), and those from North Preston (Black Refugees), the Guysborough group having been in the province three generations earlier.[24]

Howe & Walker (2000) use data from early recordings of African Nova Scotian English, Samaná English, and the recordings of former slaves to demonstrate that speech patterns were inherited from nonstandard colonial English.[25] The dialect was extensively studied in 1992 by Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte from the University of Ottawa.[24]

A commonality between African Nova Scotian English and African-American Vernacular English is (r)-deletion. This rate of deletion is 57% among Black Nova Scotians, and 60% among African Americans in Philadelphia. Meanwhile, in the surrounding mostly white communities of Nova Scotia, (r)-deletion does not occur.[26]

Older African-American English

Older or earlier African-American English refers to a set of many heterogeneous varieties studied and reconstructed by linguists as theoretically spoken by the first African Americans and African slaves in the United States. Of primary interest is the direct theoretical predecessor to AAVE. Mainly four types of sources have been used for the historical reconstruction of older AAVE: written interviews, ex-slave audio recordings, the modern diaspora dialects of isolated black communities, and letters written by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African Americans.[27] The use of the zero copula (the absence of *is* or *are*, as in *she gon' leave*), nonstandard plural forms (*the three man*, *mans*, or even *mens*) and multiple negatives (as in *no one didn't leave me nothing*) were occasional or common variants in these earlier dialects, and the latter item even the preferred variant in certain grammatical contexts.[28] Other nonstandard grammatical constructions associated with AAVE are documented in older dialects too; however, many of them are not, evidently being recent innovations of twentieth-century urban AAVE.[29]

Gullah

Sea Island Creole English, or "Gullah", is the distinct language of some African Americans along the South Carolina and Georgia coast.[30] Gullah is an English creole: a natural language grammatically independent from English that uses mostly English vocabulary. Most Gullah speakers today are probably bidialectal.[30] A sub-dialect of Gullah is also spoken in Oklahoma and Texas, known as Afro-Seminole Creole.[31]

In literature

There is a long tradition of representing the distinctive speech of African Americans in American literature. A number of researchers[32] have looked into the ways that American authors have depicted the speech of black characters, investigating how black identity is established and how it connects to other characters.

Brasch (1981:x) argues that early mass media portrayals of black speech are the strongest historical evidence of a separate variety of English for blacks.[33] Early popular works are also used to determine the similarities that historical varieties of black speech have in common with modern AAVE.[34][35]

The earliest depictions of black speech came from works written in the eighteenth century,[36] primarily by white authors. A notable exception is *Clotel* (1853), the first novel written by an African American (William Wells Brown).[37][38] Depictions have largely been restricted to dialogue and the first novel written entirely in AAVE was June Jordan's *His Own Where* (1971),[39] though Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* is a much more widely known work written entirely in AAVE.[40] Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* also has near exclusive use of AAVE.[41] The poetry of Langston Hughes uses AAVE extensively.[42]https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=African-American_English&action=edit&section=8#CITEREFRickfordRickford2000

Some other notable works that have incorporated representations of black speech (with varying degrees of perceived authenticity) include:[43]

- Edgar Allan Poe: "The Gold-Bug" (1843)
- Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick* (1851)
- Harriet Beecher Stowe: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851–1852)
- Joel Chandler Harris: Uncle Remus stories (1880)
- Mark Twain: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885)
- Thomas Nelson Page: *In Ole Virginia* (1887)
- Thomas Dixon: *The Clansman* (1905)
- William Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)
- Margaret Mitchell: *Gone with the Wind* (1936)
- Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)[44]
- William Faulkner: *Go Down, Moses* (1942)
- John Kennedy Toole: *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980)[45]
- Sapphire: *Push (novel) (1996)*[46]

As there is no established spelling system for AAVE,[47] depicting it in literature is instead often done through spelling changes to indicate its phonological features,[48] or to contribute to the impression that AAVE is being used (eye dialect).[49] More recently, authors have begun focusing on grammatical cues,[37] and even the use of certain rhetorical strategies.[50]

In television and film

Portrayals of black characters in movies and television are also done with varying degrees of authenticity.[51] In *Imitation of Life* (1934), the speech and behavioral patterns of Delilah (an African American character) are reminiscent of minstrel performances that set out to exaggerate stereotypes, rather than depict black speech authentically.[52] More authentic performances, such as those in the following movies and TV shows, occur when certain speech events, vocabulary, and syntactic features are used to indicate AAVE usage, often with particular emphasis on young, urban African Americans:[53]

- *Do the Right Thing* (1989)
- *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990–1996)
- *Jungle Fever* (1991)
- *Laurel Avenue* (1993)

- *Fresh* (1994)
- *The Best Man* (1999)
- *The Wire* (2002–2008)[54][55]
- *Moonlight* (2016)

In education

Nonstandard African-American varieties of English have been stereotypically associated with a lower level of education and low social status. Since the 1960s, however, linguists have demonstrated that each of these varieties, and namely African-American Vernacular English, is a "legitimate, rule-governed, and fully developed dialect".[56] The techniques used to improve the proficiency of African-American students learning standard written English have sometimes been similar to that of teaching a second language.[57] Contrastive analysis is used for teaching topics in African-American Vernacular English. Both the phonological and syntactic features of a student's speech can be analyzed and recorded in order to identify points for contrast with Standard American English.[57] Another way AAE can be taught is based on a strategy, communicative flexibility, that focuses on language used at home and analyzes speech during dramatic play.[58] Using this method, children are taught to recognize when SAE is being used and in which occasions, rather than conforming to the speech around them in order to sound correct.[58]

Although the stigmatization of AAE has continued, AAE remains because it has functioned as a social identity marker for many African-Americans.[59] The goal with teaching SAE is not to end its use, but to help students differentiate between settings where its use is and is not appropriate.[59]

Recently, linguists like John McWhorter have tried to persuade the public that "Black English" is not a sub-dialect or imperfect form of "Standard English". He argues that, like all human languages, Black English is a separate dialect, distinct from Standard English in the same way that Swiss German differs from High German and Sicilian differs from Italian. He also acknowledges that we have a long way to go as a society in recognizing Black English as anything but "full of slang and bad grammar".[60]

See also

- African-American Vernacular English
- Africanisms
- Code-switching
- Dialects of North American English
- English-based creole languages
- Glossary of jive talk
- Gullah language
- Habitual be
- *Is*-leveling
- Jive filter
- Scientific racism
- Languages of the United States
- Sociolinguistics
- Southern American English

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